

Obituary

Dr Paul Fischer, 1898–2003

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Dr Paul Fischer, who died on 14 September 2003 at the age of 105, was a most remarkable and well-rounded man. Although foremost an eminent French zoologist, Paul was also a gracious and cultured family man, an accomplished musician and an enthusiastic historian.

Born on 14 February 1898, Paul became interested in science as a child. This is not surprising as both his parents came from scientific backgrounds with a particular interest in molluscs. His mother, Louise Piette, was the daughter of Edouard Piette (1827–1906), a renowned authority on prehistory and well known for his work on Jurassic gastropods. His grandfather, Paul Henri Fischer (1835–1893), took over the first international magazine on molluscs, the *Journal de Conchyliologie*, in 1856, from S. Petit de la Saussaye, who had founded this journal in 1850. This publication was continued by later generations of the Fischer family until 1979. His father, Henri Fischer (1865–1916), was a Doctor es Sciences, belonging to many European scientific associations. In Paul's own generation, his brother, Edouard Fischer-Piette (1899–1988) became a malacologist (Fischer-Piette 1968), while Paul himself was a generalist with wide-ranging interests in malacology. This tradition was to continue as Paul's son, Henri Jean Louis Fischer (1932–), in his turn, did some research on Antarctic molluscs. Also, Paul's daughter, Danielle, illustrated various articles of her father's in the *Journal de Conchyliologie* from 1969 onwards, as well as his 1959 book.

Paul had a happy childhood in a home frequented by scientists. Some of his father's friends were later to become famous, for example Louis Pasteur and Pierre and Marie Curie. His parents travelled often, taking him with them, and he acquired a taste for travel that never left him. In the year that he finished his schooling, 1916, his father died and his mother took over management of the *Journal de Conchyliologie*. This knowledgeable and capable woman directed and published the journal for nearly 40 years. It was under the auspices of the 'Journal' that, in 1935, a 'Malacological Re-union' took place in Paris (Anonymous 1935). This set the stage for the First European Malacological Congress in 1962, which grew into the World Congress as it is today. In contrast, Biggs (1965) claimed that the idea of an international malacological meeting originated at the 25th Anniversary of the Nederlandse Malacologische Vereniging in 1959, and downplayed Fischer's (1962) remark in a footnote: 'Dr P. H. Fischer ... has mentioned that the idea of a European malacological organisation goes back at least to 1935.'

Paul started at the Sorbonne in 1917, but in April he was called up for military service in the First World War. He fought in the trenches until May the following year when he was wounded in action in Flanders. Subsequently he received the Military Cross and other decorations and was demobilised in 1919. Resuming his studies at university he became, in 1922, Licence es-Sciences, and then Assistant in Zoology in the Sorbonne Faculty of Sciences.



Paul H. Fischer in 1928 and Paul wearing the newly awarded Legion d'Honneur, 1982.

During the early part of his career, Paul travelled frequently, in France, Greece, and Turkey, and undertook marine research in 1921 and 1925. He accompanied Jacques Cousteau on his first dives off the coast of Brittany at this time. Subsequently, he ventured even farther afield: in 1930 to Iceland and Norway (including Spitzbergen); in 1934 to Canada and the United States; and in 1938 to Australia. On all of these journeys he combined scientific research with enthusiastic observation of the countries, and still managed to take an active interest in the *Journal de Conchyliologie* – encouraging other scientists to publish in it, correcting proofs and undertaking some of the administrative work.

At the age of 37, Paul Fischer married Marie-Helene ('Lynette') Droulers. But this was not until after he had asked her to attend lectures at the Sorbonne on Zoology and Malacology. He thought she should have some idea of what her life would be like – shared with his other passion. A son, Henri Jean Louis, was born in 1936, and a daughter, Danielle Genevieve, in 1938. In 1939, aged 40, Paul was once more mobilised for military service. This time he fought in France but for health reasons was discharged in late 1940.

In 1944 he took up the position of Chef des Travaux Pratiques de Paleontologie at the Ecole des Mines de Paris. In 1949 he was appointed Dean of the University of Saigon. He was then Professeur Titulaire de Zoologie. After a scientific mission to Japan, he left Indo-China late in 1951, arriving back in Paris in 1952 where he resumed his functions at the Ecole des Mines as Conservateur de Collections Paleontologiques. In the following years he participated in many international zoological congresses and retired in 1963. During his career he wrote over 300 research papers, which were published in various journals. In addition, he was the author of two books on molluscs (Fischer 1950, 1959).

He received awards for his work from the French Academy of Science (Laureat de l'Academie des Sciences – twice; Commandeur de l'Instruction Publique Palmes Academiques). On top of that, he was awarded the Legion d'Honneur for his services to France (first Chevalier in July 1982 and second Officier in October 1998).

Because their children had settled in Australia, Paul and Lynette Fischer retired there in the 1960s. Lynette had been brought up in Sydney from the age of 5 to 17 and Paul knew the molluscan fauna well, as he had made a second trip to Australia at the end of the Second World War.

Paul had always been extremely energetic – almost tireless – and after retirement he worked harder than ever. In 1964 the Great Barrier Reef Committee appointed him as the first Director of the Research Station on Heron Island in Queensland for 1 year. This is now a flourishing establishment run by the University of Queensland.

In 1966 he settled in Mosman on Sydney's North Shore but his travelling did not cease. Between 1966 and 1983 he visited India, Guam, South America, Japan, South Africa, Greece, Portugal, and many other places. When he was in Japan in 1982, he was approached and asked to meet an 'important person'. The meeting had to be incognito and the name of the person was not revealed. It took place on a beach and the person was none other than the Emperor Hirohito, another mollusc enthusiast.

Paul continued the publication of the *Journal de Conchyliologie* until 1979 when it was discontinued. He was made an Honorary Member of the Malacological Society of Australia (as it then was) in 1966. However, he did not restrict himself to writing about molluscs. He also wrote three books representing the reflections of a lifetime upon history, both of his own country and others (Fischer 1980, 1989, 1992). This had always been a subject of absorbing interest to him. The largest of these (Fischer 1989) is a massive book on French history in two volumes, which took 15 years to write.

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